

# **Cardinal Reinhard Marx**

## **Church, abuse and pastoral leadership**

### ***1. The shock of the sex abuse scandal and its repercussions for the life of the Church and the leadership serving it***

The realization that sexual abuse and mistreatment of children and adolescents occurred within the Church has profoundly shocked, indeed disturbed many around the world, both within and outside of the Church. Even considering the sobering account of the manifold failures of the Church throughout the course of its history, we were all deeply shocked by the extent of abuse and how far-reaching and broad the failure of the clergy was in exploiting their relationships with children and adolescents. Speaking for myself personally, I can say that the year 2010, in which the abuse debate in Germany reached its peak was the worst and most bitter year of my life. It was in particular during these months that I kept asking myself again and again: What does this crisis signify for the Church? What does the Lord want to tell us with this? Can we somehow also accept this difficult challenge as a spiritual opportunity? Now, there were of course immediate – and there still are at present – attempts at contextualizing the phenomenon, at categorizing it within a larger social context of sexual violence towards children and adolescents, as it has also become more visible in other areas of society. This surely is necessary, and scientific studies and discussions in the coming years will perhaps help us to better understand the causes of abuse and the frameworks and structures that are conducive towards its occurrence in the first place. But the big question for us as the Church still remains: How could this happen within our ranks? How was it possible that children and adolescents were so deeply wounded, body and soul, within the sphere of the Church? What lessons must we learn from this, how can we grasp this event spiritually and derive from it a mandate for the present and the future Church? It is to this set of questions that I would like to make the following remarks.

#### **1.1 The discrepancy between appearance and reality, the temptation not to face the truth**

The very fact that the Church is an institution for the good, indeed stands for that which is holy explains why the shock was so profound both within and outside of the Church. What is holiness? For Jesus it was – in a very particular way – the unison between the interior and the exterior of people's lives. He himself is the image par excellence of holiness. He is what he says, there is no discrepancy between appearance and reality. His life is identical with his mission, his actions are identical with his words. This also points to the nature of that which is sacramental, because sacrament is that which it signifies. And so Jesus insistently calls upon us again and again to align the interior life with the exterior, and not to let our words and deeds contradict this reality. For that is what he accuses the Pharisees and scribes of doing.

The Church must do everything possible both within its institutional structure and across all the limbs of its body to overcome this tension between appearance and reality, and it must do so again and again. Of course this is not possible by sheer moral force; without grace, the Church cannot be the Church, and humans cannot become holy. But it also requires strong moral power and responsibility, both of the individual and of the community, and with that a structurally secure and binding acceptance of responsibility. And then, too, it is about facing the reality of sin and progressing along the path of repentance.

The debate of the last few years helped us realize just how great the temptation in the Church was – and is – to avoid facing this truth. There can be no doubt that in recent decades, when looking at incidents of abuse and mistreatment, many of those responsible saw the protection of institutions as a priority and so an attempt was made to hide the terrible truth rather than recognize it in all its bitterness. What is more, a language that blurred lines and downplayed the facts further contributed to this. Those responsible largely thought from the point of view of protecting the institution, and priests were seen as representatives of this institution, so that accusations and charges against a priest were equated with an act of damage to the institution of the Church herself.

This is not about the apportioning of blame in hindsight but about recognizing mechanisms to which we must pay close attention. It must be noted that the victims and their perspective and their suffering were systematically ignored. There was little, if any, sense of guilt, and yet, as the words of the Psalm remind us: "But who can discern his errors? Cleanse me from my hidden faults" (Ps 19:12<sup>1</sup>) In retrospect, therefore, a large debt of sin must also be recognized when one claims that little was known back then of the impact such abuse was having on the children affected.

Credibility arises when appearance and reality resemble each other, when interiority and exteriority align as much as possible, when what one preaches is in accord with how one lives, and when what is being said matches what is being done. Such authenticity must be the hallmark of the Disciples of Christ. And yet exactly this is not the case. That is the reason why the Church has suffered a global loss of credibility from which it has yet to recover. Pope Benedict XVI stressed this very fact in his address to the Curia in December 2010: "We must accept this humiliation as an exhortation to truth and a call to renewal. Only the truth saves. We must ask ourselves what we can do to repair as much as possible the injustice that has occurred. We must ask ourselves what was wrong in our proclamation, in our whole way of living the Christian life, to allow such a thing to happen. We must discover a new resoluteness in faith and in doing good. We must be capable of doing penance. We must be determined to make every possible effort in priestly formation to prevent anything of the kind from happening again." (Address on the Occasion of Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia, 20 December 2010<sup>2</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation from RSV.

<sup>2</sup> Official translation taken from the Vatican Online archive:  
[www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2010/december/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20101220\\_curia-auguri\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20101220_curia-auguri_en.html)

## **2. The Church in the midst of the world: The social context of the shock**

It is clear that the Church lives amidst the particular prevailing social conditions of the time and thus everything that is said and done by and through the Church is also influenced by these constraints. But it is precisely part of the mystery of the incarnation that the Church can never be considered in isolation from its social environment, indeed as being outside of the world. She is a historical reality, visible and concrete. So it makes no sense to think of the Church as an island or as a ship that is beset by an armada of enemies. The Church as God's people lives in the midst of the world, and this world is changing, has different cultural requirements, experiences advances and declines. The Church is not of the world, but she is in the world, and this world again and again will cast a critical eye on the Church, who after all expresses to the world a high moral demand. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the years of the abuse debate the criticism was particularly intense.

### **2.1 The public and the media**

Not only in recent years has the Church, at least in Western societies, been under critical scrutiny of public opinion and the media. Indeed there has always been a certain tension between Church and society, and thus also with the public. Through our mediated culture, which is intensified by the Internet and other new media, public debate is aggravated. Personalization and scandal have become important elements of reporting, and certainly there are certain media that continue to find reasons to deliberately target the Church. This has always been the case and will continue to be so. Therefore it is useless to rail against the media or condemn public opinion; rather it is about openly and persuasively taking a stand through exemplary action, through conversations and through clarifications in the media. Media campaigns, which may well exist, can only lead to success if there is any truth to the allegations. Facing the media and public is a challenge bishops in particular must recognize. Stonewalling, trivialization and relativization will not foster a new credibility. There can therefore be no substitute for openness, transparency and truthfulness. We must never give the impression that we are taking advantage of the media. Official statements and public comment made by the Church must always be truthful. A short-term gain in this area can mean a sustained loss of credibility in the long run.

### **2.2 The conditions of the Rule of Law and the relationship between Church and State**

The abuse issue affected the relationship between Church and state in a special way, as the debates over the recent years have shown. Although the relationship between Church and state, and the legal status of the Church, differ from country to country, it must be clear in principle that the Church and state work together closely on these issues wherever possible and that state legislation is not perceived as an interference in internal Church affairs, as it has indeed been interpreted in the decades past. Difficulties will of course arise in states that fail to recognize the

Church as a legal institution, or are anticlerical in general. The countries in which the subject of abuse came to a head in recent years are indeed constitutional states whose principles we acknowledge and by which we abide.

Each and every particular legal framework must be closely considered, and a sound relationship with the courts and state prosecutors may contribute to achieving this. However, putting suspects under any type of general suspicion must be prevented, as well as any excessive application of the rule of law. The Church has grown to understand once again that Church and state jurisdictions are not mutually exclusive, but should rather complement each other – and that contact with the state prosecution in the case of criminal offences by Church employees is required and subject to the particular circumstances of every case.

Another determining social factor is the fact that ecclesial realities nowadays are perceived globally. Whatever is happening in the life of the Church in Sydney or New York, in Paris or Munich is observed and discussed all over the world. A Church that operates – and is visible – on this global scale has great potential, but is also challenged by the fact that whatever is happening in the global Church may have repercussions down to the last parish where events are discussed and evaluated. The consequences of which can include, for example, that someone in Germany decides to leave the Church because of a scandal that occurs in a completely different part of the world. Considering this ecclesial globalization, I personally believe that we can and should further develop and improve many things structurally as well as organizationally and legally in this regard. Here, too, we are within a new social context, one that is global and constitutes a new challenge to communication and organization within the Church.

### ***3. What courses of action does this present to the bishop?***

It is clear that considering the sacramental structure of the Church, the bishop has a particular responsibility for all aspects of life of his local church. This can sometimes be perceived as a structural overload and is only livable, because ultimately Christ himself gathers together and leads his Church. But the Church is indeed both the body of Christ and society. As Cardinal Kasper put it, "the mysterious character of the Church does not sublimate her social character." This insight also has implications for the actions of a bishop as leader.

#### **3.1 A brief theological reassurance**

The Church is indeed a "Chalcedonian" structure, as described by the documents of the Second Vatican Council (cf. LG 8). In this view the Church is in the theological sense an analogy of the incarnation, in other words the realization that the Church – much like the mystery of the incarnation of Christ – is both body and human community, visible organization and instrument of the Holy Spirit, mystery and community in an analogous way: like Jesus Christ was both God and man at the same time, "undivided and unmixed," the Church is the visible community and the body of Christ. And because this is so, in an analogous manner the basic principles of human coexistence apply within her, as for instance expressed in Catholic social

teaching. It is for this reason that the Church can progress on the path of learning and historical change in her social expression and her organization without jeopardizing the foundational basic structure given to her by Christ. The mysterious character of the Church, after all, does not dissolve the social character of the Church, which is subject to historical change. In the visible, human organization of the people of God the work of the Holy Spirit is revealed, who turns this visible community into the body of Christ. Therefore, the leadership of the bishop must be rationally measured by the question of how leadership is executed efficiently and in a goal-orientated manner. Rational insight can and must be applied even to the Church herself. This finding has implications for the actions of the bishop.

### **3.2 Criteria of the bishop's actions in view of the experience with the abuse cases**

What is above all important is to maintain focus on clear goals and to implement these on an operational level, right down to the concrete organization of the administration. In our context, it is about the clear objective of protecting children, ensuring they have a good place within the Church, fostering them and guiding them towards their God-given opportunities, allowing them to discover that faith in Christ deepens one's life, enhances it and changes one's life for the better.

The Church throughout the centuries has always been a great place for good pedagogy, for catechesis, for education. The bishop must see this important task as a priority. It then becomes all the more clear that the resulting goals (good pedagogy, catechesis) can only be achieved with qualified staff, with an efficient quality control, with sound administration and also policies covering disciplinary measures for any inappropriate behavior. In view of sexual violence against children and adolescents prevention has a particularly high priority in ensuring the Church can be a place where children and young people are truly safe. In recent decades some people have taken to formulating reservations against canon law, ecclesiastical administration and the bureaucracy. But experience shows that a deterioration of ecclesial administration right down to the keeping of official records, a disregard for Church law and contempt for discipline and quality control leads to very undesirable consequences. This is strikingly visible in particular when looking at the prosecution of abuse cases.

### **3.3 Orientation to the pastoral ministry of Jesus**

In the exercise of their duties as ecclesial leaders, the bishops naturally have to always look to the example of Jesus. We practice our task as bishops not in our own name but on behalf of someone else. We are messengers, and are not there simply for our own sake. Part of the spirituality of a leader is to live obedience as Jesus lived it. Therefore, the Episcopal authority can be exercised only in love, as it is authority in the name of him who gave "his life as a ransom for many"<sup>3</sup> (cf. Mk 10:45). This must be clearly visible in the style and quality of the Bishop's leadership. This outlook is

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<sup>3</sup> RSV.

not contrary to canon law and ecclesiastical administration; good management and consistent visitations are instruments of this service. But the focus on the pastoral ministry of Jesus emphasizes once again that priority must be given to the perspective of the weak, and in particular to that of the children. Jesus wanted them to be at the centre, indeed he wanted for us to be guided by them: "And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; "(Matthew 18:2-5<sup>4</sup>). It is to this standard that we must hold our work and our efforts accountable to.

## **4. Experiences of the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising**

I would like to add some brief notes from my own experience that may also be helpful to others.

### **4.1 The gradual path to recognition**

In Germany, the discussion of abuse cases in the Church began in 2001. Triggered by the debate about abuse within the Church in the United States, the question was raised whether there had been sexual abuse in the Church in Germany, and how the Church had handled it. However, the debate was limited, because it was apparently not as severe as in the U.S. Nonetheless we, the Conference of German Bishops, then created some guidelines, and I publicly called for anyone affected by abuse to come forward, which a few did. But even then we were not fully aware of the scale of this issue. Nor was there a consistent focus on the victims. That said, however, there was a willingness to transparently, openly and without false considerations call a spade a spade, and to fully cooperate in each case with the state prosecutor's offices.

It was only when, in the beginning of 2010, cases of abuse at a Jesuit school in Germany became public, that a movement gathered pace that to us seemed like an avalanche. Even as we were discussing a change of policy in the German Bishops' Conference, we received news of abuse cases at a Benedictine school in my Archdiocese of Munich and Freising. From that day onward, hardly a day went by without new writings and debates about sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Added to this was the fact that the Archdiocese was of particular interest to the world press, since Pope Benedict XVI was Archbishop of Munich and Freising from 1977 to 1982. There was considerable media interest in being able to accuse the pope himself of failures in this regard.

For me, it was clear that openness, clarity, education, and proactive steps forward were the only way of dealing with this crisis. This included facing the public, again and again, but also working within the Church in an enlightening and encouraging manner. Letters to the faithful and the priests were aimed at assisting with this.

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<sup>4</sup> RSV.

Above all it was also important to me to stand side by side with the priests in this tense situation, the vast majority of which loyally serve our Church, and not to allow them to be placed under general suspicion.

## **4.2. Searching for the truth and publicly expressing it**

In order to get as close to the truth as possible and both address the public's hunger for information, and to protect the priests from being placed under general suspicion, we undertook an investigation of all personnel records since the year 1945, to the extent this was possible. This study was done by independent experts, both in view of the abuse cases and in view of the behavior of administrative supervisors in order to learn from it and avoid mistakes in the future. A summary of this study was presented to the public. The complete report was – and remains to this day – under lock and key. The report clearly pointed out that the way the cases were handled was characterized very often by the idea of protecting the institution, and that the record keeping was neither consistent nor comprehensive. For all participants, including those formerly responsible, it was not an easy truth to face, but I think it was beneficial overall to do so. There was of course criticism of our behavior, but in retrospect there is no doubt that this attitude of – as far as possible – bringing the truth to light and trying to learn from it for the future was positively received both within the Church and outside of it.

## **4.3 Admitting to guilt and taking concrete measures**

Putting a spiritual emphasis on the issue through a collective admission of guilt in the form of a liturgical celebration was an important step, and this was done first with all the Bavarian bishops and later the entire Conference of German Bishops. Then very quickly concrete steps were taken with a view to prevention and education of priests and employees, which were also positively received by the public. Notwithstanding all the criticism of the Church it was still becoming evident that the Catholic Church had taken on a leading role in dealing with and implementing measures for preventing sexual abuse. After all, it soon became ever clearer that other sectors of society also had to deal with this issue. In Germany, the government therefore organized a "Roundtable: Sexual abuse of children in private and public institutions and within the family", with representatives of all relevant groups in society and in science. It was therefore not just the Catholic Church that stood at the centre of critical analysis.

Beyond these measures we also wanted to do more. Therefore, we decided to participate in this conference and simultaneously be a part of the development of an Internet portal for the prevention of sexual abuse. The development of this e-learning project is designed to run over three years and is being presented here, at this congress. The purpose of the multilingual portal is to provide web-based information and training of priests, deacons, pastoral staff and teachers of religion. It is also aimed at developing a global approach to abuse in the Catholic Church and in society. As the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising, we are contributing to the project's content, structure and funding. In Munich, the Pontifical Gregorian University recently founded and launched a new institute. It bears the name "Centre

for Child Protection." Sponsors of this institute are the Gregorian University and the Archdiocese of Munich and Freising. It also receives funding from other dioceses, a religious order and private sponsors. Scientific support is provided by the University Clinic of Ulm and the Department of Psychology at the Gregorian University here in Rome.

We have become increasingly aware that this is not only a German or an American or an Irish problem. Rather, the Church needs to work on this issue on a global scale, especially in view of the future. For this reason, eight pilot projects are to be launched in different regions and cultures around the world. It is a sign that we, as a global Church, want to work – together, as a network – towards ensuring the physical and mental health of children and young people. Only then will we move from a phase of reaction into the opportunity of acting in a positive way, and towards developing perspectives for the future.

### ***5. The crisis as an opportunity for spiritual renewal***

Without doubt, the debate over the sexual abuse of children and adolescents has greatly damaged the Church. It has led to a loss of credibility internally and externally, and this is not over yet. But if we try to understand these events also on a spiritual level, then they can be a major impetus towards conversion and renewal, and so towards rebuilding credibility, step by step. Dealing with the cases of abuse correctly and consistently and with the courage to be truthful can thus become an opportunity. Indeed, a contribution can even be made for that which is so dear to the Holy Father: evangelization and re-evangelization. One thing is clear: the work of dealing with the abuse debate and the crisis is far from over. Rather, it is about continuing the spiritual learning process and drawing new attention to the actual mission of the Church and its testimony as prescribed by the Gospel. It is about increasingly aligning, in the spirit of Jesus, the reality of the Church's life with what is rendered to us by the Gospel. This historical hour, in which of course God's call can be felt, is practically forcing us to take on an attitude of simultaneous humility and action. That which is visible externally of the Church must correspond to its inner life; appearance and reality must not be allowed to fall apart and thereby lead the Church into false witness.

All measures and structural changes aside, this is, in other words, about a profound spiritual renewal, as Pope Benedict XVI has indeed called for. At its centre are not the survival of the Church or its outward significance and its political influence, but the question of whether it fulfils its mission of showing people the way to communion with the Triune God. The task of the Church is to raise people up, to encourage them to rediscover Faith in the God and Father Jesus Christ, to discover the true potential of their humanity, and to live it. That's the way that Jesus himself said: "Do not fear, only believe." (Mark 5:36), "All things are possible to him who believes." (Mark 9:23) It must be made newly visible that the Church is there for the people, and especially for the children, the poor, and the weak.

Therefore one focus, especially in view of the abuse debate, must lie in working with children and adolescents. A fundamental and comprehensive policy on children and young people would be important; in education, catechesis and the promotion of



families, who are the primary basis of the development and promotion of life. Then the Church will prove to really be a community that is committed to life in the broadest sense, and will do so globally. The Catholic Church in particular is strongly and again and again identified with the protection of life and with the defense of life from its beginning to its end. And that is good. But it is indeed about the whole life and in particular the life that needs protection, promotion, training, education and love: the life of the little ones, the children, and the adolescents.

If the Church is now once again taking on its task of being a sign and sacrament of God's love, and putting the protection and promotion of the life of children at the very centre of its interests; then such actions and work are a decisive contribution towards Evangelization. As a result, the crisis of recent years may also be the starting point "Towards Healing and Renewal" of the Church in the future.